**THE CIVIL WAR IN FRANCE**

**STUDENT’S NAME**

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**THE CIVIL WAR IN FRANCE**

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**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper is to delve into the intricacies of the Commune in 19TH Century France, examine the social factors that brought up the civil war, Thier’s Massacre, the events of the civil war and the lasting impact of the riotousness. I seek to comprehensively highlight the background of the conflict, look keenly into Marx’s insights on the major players, examine the French Commune, the causes of class gaps and the enduring impact of this period alongside the lessons for today’s France.

It is my understanding that France today is looked at as a quintessential ‘republican’ country, but, this was not the case 150 years ago in the 19th Century when it was largely a monarchy and empire.

The civil war was an inevitable unrest whose bane was the ever growing deep social class divide buoyed by the growing desire for a new social order with the republic as a means to achieve it

I will examine the role played by the Franco-Prussian war and the siege of Paris in provoking the civil war to a blood bath.

The civil war in France was basically a war that pitted the wealthy ruling class against the suffering working class who were suffering under the weight of poor working conditions, dwindling jobs and heavy taxation.

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The key players in the civil war in France were the following:

* The Bourgeoisie and capitalists.
* The working class (Paris Commune) led by the Feminist, Louise Michel, and Gustave Courbet.
* Adolphe Thiers – Leader of the Conservatists’ government in Versailles.
* Marshal Patrice MacMahon – General of the Versailles’ Forces.
* Jules Favre
* Other Military Leaders.
* International Influences led by figures like Karl Marx who issued statements supporting the Commune.

**Introduction**

The civil war in France was unrest that was brewed in a cauldron of varied dynamics that marked the differences in the political, social and economic factors with the key players representing a wide scope of ideologies and interests.

This multifaceted conflict lasted from March to May of 1871, and was comprised of the establishment of the Paris Commune, a revolutionist socialist government that had seized power and control of Paris briefly, against the Bourgeoisie and capitalists of France.

1. **Socio-economic inequities**

The labor class (a term that was coined by Karl Marx) in Paris were faced with great economic hardships coupled with ever rising cost of living, and high punitive taxes, unemployment rates, and deplorable living conditions. The Bourgeoisie on the other hand, grew wealthy using their well-placed political connections, further deepening class divides. These were largely the grievances that would fuel the civil war in France.

1. **Formation and ideology**

The Bourgeoisie unable to face the growing dissent from the working class whom they were unwilling to yield to, and driven by self-preservation, they threw their weight behind two rival monarchist factions: the ‘Legitimists’ (supporters of the old Bourbon dynasty) and the ‘Orleanists’ (defenders of King Louis Philippe). It was this division and failed attempt at distraction of social issues that would set the stage for a bitter struggle which would leave its mark on the events of 1870 – 1871.

June 1848 – the new republic proclaimed its birth with a massacre of the most radical Parisian workers and leaders.

2nd December 1851 – The then president and nephew to Napoleon Bonaparte, Louis Bonaparte, dissolved the republic in a self-executed military coup. France then suffered deeply through years of storm and dissension that forced the masses of the middle class to beg for order for their selfish reason of going back to profitability. The result was that the Bourgeoisie republic was sacrificed for peace and profits. *As Karl Marx explained in his classical work and I quote,*

*“…the Bourgeoisie confesses that its own interests dictate that it should be delivered from the danger of its own rule; that, in order to restore tranquility in the country, its bourgeoisie parliament must, first of all, be laid to rest; that, in order to preserve its social power intact, its political power must be broken…”*

The Franco-Prussian war that followed and the subsequent humiliating defeat of King Louis Philippe’s government and downfall served to weaken the political class. The resulting deep class split both ideological and social brought on the onset of an explosive civil war.

1. **The Civil War**

France’s National Guard, the armed people, took over Paris in March 1871, and chose a running committee whose head was a Central Committee. They drove the Conservatives under Thiers out of Paris and their supporters who fled to Versailles which they proceeded to declare the capital of France. France became effectively by fact, a nation under a dual government – a situation that could not be sustained. *As Karl Marx put it in his publication of ‘The Civil War in France’,*

*“…the commune was the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of labor (which) was, therefore, to serve as a lever for uprooting the economical foundation upon which rests the existence of classes, and therefore of class rule…”*

1. **The Bloody Week (May 21st-28th, 1871)**

The Versailles government of conservatists under Thier was faced with two choices: concessions or repression and they chose the latter. In May 1871, the Versailles government launched a military force to suppress the commune resulting in a violent-bloody, and long-drawn-out conflict where thousands of French citizens were executed, thousands deported, and Paris itself suffered a lot of damage.

1. **The Fall of the Commune**

They had the goodwill of the people, time and chance but they bickered on moral grounds and failed to seize advantage of having the country’s National Treasury which was still holding wealth in its vaults, they had the offices of the Foreign Affairs Ministry and would have used the documents and written communications to show the people how they were lied to and used by the government but they did not. These blunders and the fact that the Versailles Government accessed Paris through an unguarded side led to the fall of the Commune and the persecution that followed.

1. **The Aftermath and The Legacy**

While the civil war was finally suppressed, it had profound consequences for the French in terms of politics and society. It was and has to date been used by communists as an inspiration on the struggle between ingrained power structures and dreams for a just and a democratic equitable society. It had inevitably shaped the social justice discourse in France.

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